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Identity and metapragmatic acts in a student forum discussion thread

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Abstract

Starting with the idea that identity is dynamic, interactive and contextualised, the present study offers a close reading of a discussion thread from an online student discussion forum. During the discussion, the interactants both construct identity with language and use identity in order to frame and evaluate their own and others' contributions. The discussion turns into a metapragmatic debate in which the interactants move away from the topic of the discussion to talk about who is allowed to say what on the topic. The analysis shows how a participant whose identity is flexible is challenged by the other participants, for whom her identity is defined from the beginning, as she self-positions as an outsider. Her contributions are evaluated against this positioning, and for the others her identity resists change.

Keywords: identity construction, metapragmatic acts, positioning, self-positioning, negotiation, evaluation, online interaction, discussion forum.

1 Introduction

This paper offers a close reading of a discussion thread on an online student discussion forum based in the UK. The thread is initially about the difficulties faced by students during the first weeks at university, but after a while the discussion changes its direction and becomes a debate on who is allowed to say what in the forum. The debate centres on a participant who, after identifying herself as non-British, goes on to criticise British habits, which results in her statements being read and evaluated against this background by other (British) participants. In other words, identities and ideologies become intertwined in the discussion. The paper explores two questions: how the participants of the discussion construct identity with language, and how they – explicitly or implicitly – use identity in order to frame their statements and evaluate those of others.

The starting point of this study is the definition of identity as “a discursive construct that emerges in interaction”, provided by Bucholtz and Hall (2005, p. 587). More specifically, the study focuses on the role of indexicality in the

construction of identity, i.e. how participants indicate their own and others' identity positions in interaction. It thus contributes to the growing number of studies in which discourse analysts strive "to show not only the centrality of the role of language in the construction and transmission of identities, but also the concrete forms in which and through which language practices index such identities" (De Fina, 2006, p. 351).

The present study highlights the role of the participants of the interaction and their reflexive awareness of the communicative act they are involved in. In practice, the analysis focuses on instances in which the participants themselves talk about their own and others' identities and how those identities frame their interaction. The indexical construction of identity is therefore approached through the lens of metapragmatics. With metapragmatic acts, participants can comment on their own and their fellow participants' contributions to the interaction. Earlier research has identified how metapragmatic acts can be used in, for instance, the negotiation of appropriateness (Tanskanen, 2007, 2014) and rudeness (Kleinke & Bös, 2015). This study looks at how they are used in the negotiation of identity, as the participants of the discussion forum construct their own and others' identities and evaluate language use against these identities.

2 Constructing identity

2.1 Identity and interaction

Recent research has established that the construction of identity is dynamic, interactive and contextualised (Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998; Bamberg, De Fina, & Schifffrin, 2011; Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; De Fina, 2003; Delahunty, 2012; Kopytowska, 2012; Waugh, 2010). In the words of Bucholtz and Hall (2005, pp. 585–586), identity is "a relational and sociocultural phenomenon that emerges and circulates in local discourse contexts of interaction rather than a stable structure located primarily in the individual psyche or in fixed social categories". Rather than making use of identity categories, the meanings of which have been defined in advance, interactants negotiate the meanings while interacting.

Studies on identity construction in digital discourse confirm the idea of identity as flexible and negotiated. Locher and Hoffmann (2006) focus on the emerging identity of a fictional expert advice-giver. Identity construction in Facebook profiles and status updates has been investigated by Bolander and Locher (2010), Locher and Bolander (2015) as well as Zhao, Grasmuck and Martin (2008). Page (2011) looks at storytelling as a means of performing identity in social networks, while Delahunty (2012) addresses the construction of learner identity on a post-

graduate student discussion forum. Like the present study, all of these share a view of identity as complex, social, emergent, created and negotiated in context. De Fina (2006, p. 355) reminds us, however, that negotiable though they may be, identities are neither solely nor exclusively locally negotiated, but also based on shared ideologies and beliefs. Ideological factors play a significant role in the construction of group identity in particular, as the members of a group negotiate “who they are, what the criteria for membership in their group are, how they relate to members of other groups and what their goals and values are” (van Dijk, 1998, p. 129; see also Waugh, 2010, p. 82).

In their theorising review of identity research, Bucholtz and Hall (2005) suggest five different principles that cover the study of identity. The first one, that identity is emergent, social and cultural, has already been discussed above. The second, the positionality principle, states that identity encompasses several levels of categories: macro-level demographic categories, local cultural positions and temporary interactionally specific roles. The relationality principle refers to the fact that identities are phenomena that acquire their social meaning in relation to other available identity positions. The partialness principle states that identity is always partial, produced through contextually situated and ideologically informed configurations of self and other. Finally, according to the indexicality principle, identity is constructed in language use by overt identity labels, presuppositions and implicatures, evaluative and epistemic orientations to ongoing talk and participant roles, as well as style and code choices (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). While all of these are relevant, the last is especially important for the present study, which approaches the construction of identity from the perspective of metapragmatics.

2.2 *Identity and metapragmatics*

Metapragmatic acts are an important linguistic resource which can indexically construct identity. These acts are one way of signalling reflexive or metapragmatic awareness, i.e. the understanding that interactants have of how language is used for interaction (Blommaert & Rampton, 2011; Culpeper & Haugh, 2014, p. 237; Verschueren, 2000). Metapragmatic acts are a visible sign of the management of discourse (Caffi, 1998), whereby interactants reflect on their own and other people’s communicative behaviour. Interactants use these acts to comment on their own and their fellow interlocutors’ contributions. They can be used, for instance, for clarifying or rephrasing contributions in case of evident or potential misunderstanding (e.g. *that is not what I was saying!*), or making assessments of the appropriateness of contributions visible (e.g. *I see you’re missing the point*) (Caffi, 1998; Hübler & Bublitz, 2007; Tanskanen, 2007).

Metapragmatic acts are not concerned with the topic of the discussion but comment on the communicative act itself, and they may be self- or other-directed. To take an example from Hübler and Bublitz (2007, pp. 17–18), several functions can be posited for an other-directed metapragmatic act such as *You are repeating yourself*, depending on the context. It is evaluative to begin with, expressing a negative attitude towards a fellow interactant, but it can also be provocative and conflictual. It may be organisational in nature, signalling an attempt to gain the floor, or it can address a communicative norm, such as brevity. Lastly, it may serve to create or modify identity, as the utterance can help profile the interactant as critical, with a social status that entitles them to utter it.

Digital discourse is a fruitful area for studying metapragmatic behaviour, because as Georgakopoulou (2003) notes, (text-based) computer-mediated discourse shows a heightened degree of metalinguistic awareness due to the lack of non-verbal cues (see also Hancock & Dunham, 2001). By looking at metapragmatic acts used in the negotiation of identity, the present study tackles one strategy with which interactants can express their metalinguistic awareness.

3 Material: *The Student Room*

The material for the present study comes from *The Student Room* (TSR), which advertises itself as the “largest student community in the world – over 1.8m members” (thestudentroom.co.uk). The online community website comprises several sections, from “Applying to uni” to “Careers and Jobs” to the discussion forums, where you can “discuss anything – universities, health, lifestyle, relationships & more”. The description of the community indicates its participatory, interactional focus: the participants are responsible for creating most of the content.

The online discussion analysed in the present paper took place in September 2006 in the discussion forum of TSR. The topic of the discussion is *Anyone else finding Freshers week difficult?*; Freshers Week is the period at the beginning of the academic year, the purpose of which is to orient and welcome new students to a university. The discussion consists of 172 posts, and altogether 52 participants took part in the discussion. Most of them contributed to the topic at hand, i.e. Freshers Week, but some participants, although ostensibly talking about the original topic, created a new topic for the discussion, a debate on who is allowed to say what about Freshers Week on the forum. Four participants in particular, Laurelei, Zigzag1, Timeoff and Rachel2¹, took part in this parallel

¹ In line with current ethical practice, the nicknames of the participants have been changed (see e.g. Bruckman 2002; Ortega & Zyzik 2008).

metapragmatic discussion. Laurelei contributed altogether 20 posts to this discussion, Zigzag1 seven, Timeoff 16 and Rachel2 14; some other posters participated with one or two posts.

That a discussion on an online forum can turn into a debate or even a conflict is a finding that has emerged again and again in research on digital discourse. Early studies, such as Baron (1984) and Hiltz, Johnson and Turoff (1986) identified a greater frequency of arguments in electronic than in face-to-face interaction. Subsequent research has corroborated the finding that disagreement and hostility are common in online interaction (see e.g. Adrianson & Hjelmquist, 1991; Avgerinakou, 2003; Bolander, 2012; Bou-Franch & Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2014; Graham, 2007). Research has also drawn attention to the fact that participants in electronic interactions use various affiliative and facilitative strategies in order to avoid communicative failure (Garcia & Jacobs, 1999; Hancock & Dunham, 2001; Harrison, 2000; Tanskanen, 2007). Indeed, electronic interaction seems to possess its own principles of politeness and impoliteness (Graham, 2008; Haugh, 2010; Locher, 2010).

The Student Room upholds a moderation policy according to which posts submitted to the discussion forum may be edited or deleted and entire threads closed (TSR “Terms and conditions”). In order to avoid intervention by moderators, participants must follow six community guidelines: be friendly, keep it clean, stay on topic, no cheating, no advertising, keep it legal (TSR “Community guidelines”). There were no comments or other activity by the moderators during the Freshers Week discussion, indicating that the moderators felt no need to intervene and that none of the participants requested such intervention.

4 Identity and metapragmatic acts in the Freshers Week discussion

4.1 Laurelei’s self-positioning as continental

The Freshers Week discussion starts with a seemingly innocent inquiry about people’s thoughts on Freshers Week, posted by Badnick:

- (1) It’s only my second day here so I know that things will be a bit unsettled for a while, but I am feeling really disorientated and weird about the whole thing. How’s everyone else feeling? It feels so odd to be in a completely different place and not have any friends (even though I have been out socialising!)

(Badnick, #1, 20/09/06 18:21)²

The discussion continues with several participants giving their thoughts on Freshers Week. In the next 57 posts, participants describe how they loved or hated Freshers week, how they survived it, and how one should just try to enjoy it. With post number 59, posted by Laurelei, a change in the direction of the discussion occurs:

- (2) i didnt like freshers too much either. I did go and talked to people, but they mostly hang out in our kitchen and get drunk on the very bad british wine (**coming from the continent, I'm entitled to say this**) and talk about stuff I dont care about.. then they go out, get pissed and come back at 3am, screaming and running up and down corridors. The nice people I've met were on the course inductions, so I am hoping to get along a lot better with the people on my different courses.

The biggest thing about Freshers seems to be to get as drunk as possible as many nights as possible - totally incomprehensible to me, and childish in my opinion, too. Thats something you do when you 15 or 16... or I might be wrong. whatever.

(Laurelei, #59, 23/09/06 19:51)

Laurelei's post and especially her³ comment, indicated in bold, marks a turning point in the discussion. The gist of her post is that she did not enjoy Freshers Week and the fact that many people got drunk, of all things on "the very bad british wine". What follows this is a self-directed metapragmatic act, and the fact that it is in brackets emphasises its metapragmatic nature: it is extra information on why Laurelei thinks she has the right to say what she is saying. The first part, *coming from the continent*, is Laurelei performing an identity act (Vaugh, 2008, 2010): she self-positions (Davies & Harré, 1990) as continental. Interestingly, Laurelei's personal information on her member page reveals that she was "born and raised in Southern Germany". For some reason, in her post she chooses to identify herself as continental rather than German (on the construction of

² The participant's name is given in brackets after the post, followed by the number of the post in the thread and the time it was posted. All extracts from the discussion are unedited; where that lengthy extracts had to be abridged, deletions are indicated with three dots in square brackets [...].

³ By clicking on the participant's nickname, their member page with personal information is displayed. Some participants have added a photograph, most give their first name or indicate their gender with a symbol. I have used this information for the personal pronouns used to refer to the participants. When little or no personal information is given, I use the singular reference 'they'.

national identity, see de Cillia, Reisigl, & Wodak, 1999; Wodak, de Cillia, Reisigl, & Liebhart, 1999).

The identity act is combined with an evaluative act, with which she describes her post as appropriate: *I'm entitled to say this*. In its entirety, Laurelei's metapragmatic act is telling the other participants in the interaction that her status as someone coming from the Continent entitles her to criticise British wine. Since The Freshers Week discussion is about practices in British universities and it takes place on a discussion forum based in Britain, Laurelei clearly self-positions as non-British an outsider – with her act. She ends her post with another self-directed metapragmatic act, *I might be wrong*, which she uses to mitigate her opinion about the childishness of getting drunk.

The first reply she gets is very supportive, stating that Laurelei should not worry, mature friends “just take a bit longer to find” (Twopence #62). Laurelei replies and explains that after experiencing immature behaviour in boarding school, she would now “rather have something else” (Laurelei #63). The next post (3), however, has a very different tone. With his comment, Zigzag1 claims that Laurelei's post shows a racist attitude, presumably against the British, and that this means that she is not going to be successful in finding friends. Within practically a couple of minutes, Zigzag1 receives two replies (examples 4 and 5):

- (3) Your racist, stuck-up attitude is not gonna take you very far in the friendmaking game.
(Zigzag1, #64, 23/09/06 20:48)
- (4) what was 'racist' about that? they don't like british wine?
...erm.
I don't like any wine, doesn't mean I'm racist against every wine producing nation in the world.
(Hyperactive, #65, 23/09/06 20:52)
- (5) she insulted our wine!! someone – burn her
zigzag, i can see what youre trying to say but racism isnt something you should casually accuse people of
(Twopence, #66, 23/09/06 20:54)

In example (4), Hyperactive tells Zigzag1 that Laurelei's post was not racist, because not liking British wine is not racist. Twopence in (5) first uses sarcasm (*she insulted our wine!! someone – burn her*), but continues by telling Zigzag1 that while he can understand his point, he thinks that accusations of racism go too far. What is interesting in the post by Twopence is the identity work done

with the possessive pronoun *our*, with which Twopence self-positions as British and creates a contrast with Laurelei: *she* (who is not British) *insulted our* (British) *wine*. Zigzag1 responds with the following self-directed metapragmatic act (6):

- (6) It was a joke.
(Zigzag1, #68, 23/09/06 21:02)

Claiming that you were not serious or that you were trying to be humorous is not uncommon in online debates and this is exactly what Zigzag1 does as well. In other words, with his metapragmatic act he is now saying that the other participants misread his post and failed to see that it was actually a joke. A retrospective labelling of a post as humorous has the effect of shifting the responsibility from the writer of the post to the readers, who misunderstood the intentions of the writer.

- (7) well put a :) at the end then!
(Twopence, #69, 23/09/06 21:03)

Twopence in (7) tells Zigzag1 that the responsibility lies with him: if his intention was indeed to be humorous, he should have added an emoticon, a smiley, to indicate that he was not being serious. According to Twopence, Zigzag1 should not have expected the other participants to read his post correctly without a smiley. Twopence's suggestion is an indication that emoticons are seen as carrying illocutionary force (Dresner & Herring, 2010), and that they can help clarify post intention (Thompson & Filik, 2016; see also Derks, Bos, & von Grumbkow, 2007).

4.2 Laurelei's self-positioning as British

Laurelei returns to the discussion with the following reply to Zigzag1 (8):

- (8) [quotation from the original post by Zigzag1]
doesnt sound too jokingly to me...
anyway. It's not racist. I am a British citizen myself, so go figure.
I simply dont like the wine people buy and drink here.
I think the people are nice, but immature. Sorry for being "stuck up" if I am not too fond of immaturity... I guess you love immaturity, and think its the way to go. Have fun.
(Laurelei, #72, 23/09/06 21:22)

Laurelei does not accept Zigzag1's claim that he was joking; according to her evaluation, his post does not appear humorous. What follows is somewhat surprising: after identifying herself as continental in her first post, Laurelei now self-positions as British. She states that her opinion was not racist because she is in fact a British citizen – but one who simply does not like British wine. From her position as the other, created with her first post, she is now moving towards being “one of us” on this British students' discussion forum.

Laurelei's shifting identity goes unnoticed by the next poster, who, judging by the time stamps, may actually have been composing their post simultaneously with Laurelei:

- (9) [quotation from the original post by Zigzag1]
I think I would rather call it "mature attitude". I can't see what is stuck up about finding "young teenage games" in the dead of the night unsuitable for a supposedly "grown up" student. [...]
As to the racist...where did your text analysis find that? ;)
(Timeoff, #73, 23/09/06 21:25)

Timeoff in (9) is replying to Zigzag1's original post to inform him that Laurelei's attitude is not stuck up or racist. Zigzag1 reacts quickly:

- (10) I'll repeat for any people who can't read: it was a joke, I was mockingly making fun of the fact that Laurelei doesn't like British wine and thinks she has a right, as a continental person, to dis British things, even though she chooses to study here.
(Zigzag1, #74, 23/09/06 21:44)

Zigzag1 repeats his claim that his post should have been read as a joke, at the same time rebuking Timeoff for not reading his later post. He offers a metapragmatic explanation of what he was trying to say with his post. It is clear that for him Laurelei remains continental; although he criticises Timeoff for not reading posts, he himself seems to have missed Laurelei's latest post. There is also an undercurrent in Zigzag1's post, according to which people who choose to study in Britain should not be critical towards British "things". Timeoff is not offended by the rebuke:

- (11) A suggestion: your phrasing was not really clear, making it difficult to see it was meant as a joke. You did explain, mind you others didn't see the joke either. Just post a smilie or something after your post (as suggested), then these misunderstandings will maybe not happen. :)

(Timeoff, #77, 23/09/06 22:03)

In (11), Timeoff offers a metapragmatic evaluation of Zigzag1's original post, repeating the advice given by a previous poster on the use of a smiley, which would make the illocutionary force of the post clearer and help others read the post correctly (Dresner & Herring, 2010; Thompson & Filik, 2016). The following morning, Zigzag1 replies to Timeoff:

- (12) [quotation from Timeoff's post #77]
Yeah I see what you mean.
I'd like to explain, for clarification, the joke. It was sarcasm in which I say "you're racist for not liking British wine", when we all know British wine is terrible.
(Zigzag1, #86, 24/09/06 09:22)

Example (12) is the third post from Zigzag1 explaining his original post. After submitting the posts in examples (6) and (10), he still obviously feels the need to explain his intention retrospectively. His story has also slightly changed: in (10), he said that he was making fun of the fact that Laurelei was criticising British wine although she chooses to study in Britain, whereas in (12) he is saying that everyone knows that British wine is terrible, and this is the reason why his post should have been read as sarcastic. There is no explicit indication in Zigzag1's post that he has read Laurelei's post in which she identifies herself as British, but it is interesting to speculate on his usage of the pronoun *we*. Zigzag1 points out that *we all know British wine is terrible*. Is this perhaps an inclusive *we* which covers everyone in the discussion, including Laurelei (on inclusive vs. exclusive uses of the first person plural pronouns, see Kleinke & Bös, this volume)? She seems to think so:

- (13) okay, sorry :)
a smilie really would have helped ;)
(Laurelei #87, 24/09/06 13:38)

In (13) Laurelei acknowledges and accepts Zigzag1's explanation that his post was a sarcastic joke, pointing out what others have also suggested, that a smiley would have been helpful. Laurelei's post seems to end the debate on racism and British wine, and indeed for a while the discussion continues on the original topic. i.e. people's feelings about Freshers Week. This lasts until post #107, posted by Rachel2 three days after Laurelei's last post:

- (14) [quotation from Laurelei's original post]

Binge drinking is a deeply rooted part of British culture. And frankly your comments about it are quite insulting.

This is not a joke. Quit criticising our culture or go somewhere else to uni.

(Rachel2, #107, 27/09/06 20:31)

Rachel2 was not posting when the debate started, so it is likely that she found the thread later, read the posts and then decided to reply to Laurelei's post with a metapragmatic evaluation. That she has read the posts becomes clear in her post which echoes Zigzag1's words in (10): Laurelei should go and study somewhere else if she cannot help criticising British habits. Moreover, Rachel2's self-directed *this is not a joke* is a direct reference to Zigzag1's posts, and she goes as far as to claim that binge drinking is a key part of British culture, and that it is insulting if someone criticises it. Whether or not she has seen Laurelei's self-positioning as British is unclear, but it is obvious that Laurelei is not included in the possessive pronoun in *our culture* (see Kleinke & Bös, this volume). The first reply to Rachel2 comes from Timeoff:

- (15) I wouldn't call binge drinking "culture". Just because someone doesn't agree with a habit and actually has the courage to say so, does not mean they are criticising a country or it's people. Get real! That kind of comment is really not needed, out of place in this thread (go and make a: "kick foreigners out" thread) and apart from that it is xenophobic.

And before you say it: I may live in Germany but I am British.

(Timeoff, #113, 27/09/06 22:07)

Timeoff does not agree with Rachel2 that binge drinking is culture. They are also clearly evaluating Rachel2's comment as inappropriate for the current thread (*go and make a: "kick foreigners out" thread*). Timeoff concludes with an identity act, self-positioning as British though living in Germany. Timeoff seems to worry about being classified as a foreigner by the other posters because the place of residence indicated on their member page is not Britain. Rachel2 holds on to her opinion:

- (16) What british people say about their own is one thing. I don't go on continental forums and criticize all the things I hate about their countries. The poster made it quite clear what she thought of what is a key part of what the Brits do. I find it totally offensive, and inappropriate.

(Rachel2, #114, 27/09/06 22:10)

Rachel2 repeats her evaluation of Laurelei's post as offensive and inappropriate, and Laurelei's self-positioning as British remains unacknowledged as well. Rachel2 clearly perceives Laurelei as continental and non-British: in other words, as someone who, unlike the British themselves, should not criticise Britain. In her reply (17), Laurelei starts with this:

- (17) I am British.
you cannot honestly think drinking til you drop can be called
"culture", because if you do, sorry, you're a sad person. I also do
not see the point in telling me to go somewhere else if i dont like
the drinking culture, as I can avoid it. I just think it is merely
stupid, unhealthy and immature. 15 year olds do that, then you
know your limit...
[...]
I am not saying I dont like the British. I don't like binge drinking.
In any country. And it is not culture
(Laurelei, #115, 27/09/06 22:21)

Laurelei first performs an identity act, self-positioning as British. She then explains what she thinks about binge drinking and that to her it is not culture; she repeats many of the points she already made in her original post in which she identified herself as continental. She gets an almost immediate reply from Rachel2:

- (18) It most certainly is part of the British identity and part of their
culture. Culture is anything we do, that monkeys don't do.
Whether you think it is any good or not is another matter, it doesnt
make it not culture. How you can class something as 'immature'
which is engaged in by such a large proportion of 18–30 year olds,
and a lesser though significant portion of 30–50 year olds baffles
me. Drunken behaviour may be immature, but that is due to
drunkenness. I suspect you were just using it to be condescending
and add punch to your own viewpoint. That's usually the reason
people bandy about that word. If you don't like it, fine, don't do
it, but slating others for doing it is not going to win you any
friends, or make you look remotely sophisticated.
And what happened to being continental? Or is that only when it
suits you.
(Rachel2, #116, 27/09/06 22:29)

Rachel2 is persistent: she still considers binge drinking as culture, because “*culture is anything we do, that monkeys don’t do*”. According to her, Laurelei should not criticise the behaviour even if she does not want to engage in it herself. She evaluates Laurelei’s comment as condescending. Laurelei’s British identity is finally recognised: Rachel2 wants to know “*what happened to being continental*”. She concludes by alleging that Laurelei shifts her identity as the need arises.

4.3 Laurelei’s self-positioning as someone with a dual nationality

Laurelei’s reply in (19) provides an explanation for her shifting identity:

- (19) I have a dual nationality.
I did not say I dont like the people that do it. I dont like the act of doing it. I quite like most of the people here around me, and to discourage you, they like me.
I do not try to sound condescending and I dont feel any need to sound sophisticated.
There are two ways of culture. there is the kind that is rooted in history or at least the nearer past as well as the mentality of people. I personally could not count drinking habits as such. They are habits, and we are fooled to saying they are culture because they are such widespread habits, at least in my opinion.
And why would I not be able to class someting as immature, even if 80 year olds were doing it? it would still be immature. and I am saying - just to press this once more - the action is immature, not the people.
I hope I made my point a little clearer..
(Laurelei, #119, 27/09/06 22:41)

Laurelei’s third identity act sees her self-positioning as a person with a dual nationality. After first presenting herself as continental and later British, she now reveals why her identity seems to be shifting: she is both continental and British. The post also contains a retrospective metapragmatic evaluation of her earlier posts, as she tries to explain what she meant. The time stamps suggest that Timeoff has not seen Laurelei’s latest post:

- (20) [quotation from Rachel2’s post]
Maybe it is a continental thing, speaking one’s mind? I must say whilst I don’t find it to be extremely considerate towards the

mentioned people's feelings it is nowhere near insulting to me.
But I guess people are different.
(Timeoff, #120, 27/09/06 22:41)

Timeoff continues to view Laurelei as continental, or at least her behaviour as indicative of a continental background, but does not think it is insulting. It is of course possible that Timeoff sees Laurelei as both continental and British, but that her speaking her mind is more continental than British. Rachel2 is adamant:

- (21) [quotation from Laurelei's post #119]
Immature is a ridiculous and misleading word that is irritating in itself. ...You deliberately used it to be condescending...Saying what you have said, in the way you have said it, about a 'habit' that is engaged in by millions of people, is going to get responses like mine.
(Rachel2, #121, 27/09/06 22:51)

Rachel2's evaluation of Laurelei's posts remains unchanged: to her, Laurelei's opinions and her way of expressing them are irritating, and "millions of people" cannot be wrong in their habit. After this post, the conflict continues with Laurelei and Rachel2 arguing with each other. Timeoff tries to intervene with the following reply to Rachel2's post in which she is accusing Laurelei of just throwing insults with her "*continental maturity*":

- (22) [quotation from Rachel2's post]
I for one find you rather tiresome, not only in this thread but in most of the other posts of your's I have come across.
I think you have made your point, no need to want others to agree to your view. Hammering on about it will not make it more conclusive. You think your way and others think differently. End of discussion. :)
(Timeoff, #159, 28/09/06 21:32)

Timeoff is very critical of Rachel2's posts and is trying to suggest that it is time to stop the debate because people are not likely to change their opinions. The post is evaluative and critical towards Rachel2, and also clearly organisational in its attempt to end the discussion. The following exchange then takes place:

- (23) I am not going to just walk off and leave the discussion on the note of someone insulting me.
(Rachel2, #160, 28/09/06 21:38)

- (24) I dare say, don't be so touchy. You are not exactly mincing your words either.

(Timeoff, #161, 28/09/06 21:44)

- (25) I most certainly am not mincing my words, but when someone has no comeback on the actual issue so resorts simply to insults, I find it necessary to highlight the fact. It is not a question of sensitivity.

(Rachel2, #162, 28/09/06 21:48)

Despite Timeoff's request to end the discussion, Rachel2 submits two further posts, neither of which shows any attempt towards compromise, after which she withdraws from the debate. In (23), Rachel2 asserts that she is not one to leave in the middle of a debate, while Timeoff in (24) informs her that her words have also been insulting and thus may have been inciting the debate. Example (25) is, in fact, Rachel2's last post in this thread; she never posts again after this. If we compare Rachel2's behaviour to the findings of Bou-Franch and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (2014) from their study on YouTube polylogues, we can see the same tendencies, namely that compromise and assent are rare in conflict situations, while withdrawal is the most frequent strategy to end conflict. Rachel2 then receives support from a participant who has remained quiet for a while:

- (26) Rachel2 is not the only person here who was pissed off by Laurelei's comments.

(Zigzag1, #164, 28/09/06 22:12)

Zigzag1 returns to the discussion with an evaluative comment indicating that he was also annoyed by Laurelei. After all the posts in which he declared that he was not serious in accusing Laurelei of racism, that he was merely joking and making fun of bad British wine, he now seems to be confessing that Laurelei's opinions actually irritated him. Timeoff replies with a further appeal for compromise:

- (27) And there were quite a few others who were pissed off by Rachel2's comments. Why not call it a tie?

(Timeoff, #165, 28/09/06 22:22)

This appeal, too, goes unheeded, as Laurelei posts yet again:

- (28) [quotation from Rachel2's post]

Arguing with you is as effective as running into a stone wall and just as tiring. [...]

Zigzag, whatever I say pisses you off. So why bother reading it?

Go have a UKIP party with Rachel

I'll leave it at that and hope people are going to discuss the original topic again, which does seem to be an issue...or did I misunderstand that? Rachel, go on, call me a coward. I am tired of your xenophobic rants.

(Laurelei, #168, 29/09/06 00:55)

With this evaluative and organisational post, tired of arguing with Rachel2, Laurelei informs the others that she is concluding the discussion on her part. She accuses Rachel2 of xenophobia, and the UKIP reference directed to Zigzag1 shows that she thinks he shares Rachel2's views. Laurelei seems convinced that Rachel2 and Zigzag1 will always view her as a foreigner, an outsider, the other. Zigzag1 replies one more time:

- (29) Woah, nice little insult there. Reasoning with you is just as effective as reasoning with a wall, except the wall doesn't bombard everyone with racially motivated insults.

(Zigzag1, #169, 29/09/06 10:09)

In (29), Zigzag1 returns to the theme of his first post in (3) and accuses Laurelei of racially motivated behaviour. Although she previously declared that she is ending the discussion, Laurelei has apparently been following the discussion, and Zigzag1's post prompts her to reply:

- (30) My motives are not racially motivated. How many times do I have to tell you people that I not only *like* the British in general, I also *am* one?

(Laurelei, #170, 29/09/06 10:39)

Laurelei performs her final identity act, self-positioning as British, and argues that her motives are therefore not racially motivated. At this point, the discussion seems to have gone a full circle, and a new participant submits the following post:

- (31) JEEEEZ^^^

So.....anyone else finding Freshers Week difficult? LOL

I know that I was until I came across this thread and read the last 2 pages....that kept me entertained....LOL

(Hannah, #171, 29/09/06 10:50)

Hannah seems to be amused by the discussion (or at least the last two pages), as she ironically reminds the others of the original topic (*anyone else finding Freshers Week difficult? LOL*). She gets one reply:

- (32) sorry *blushes* I feel mean for spamming all the way through this thread and thus maybe keeping people with real issues away from it. At least it was entertaining to you ;) I just felt I had to try and defend myself, forgetting that it was quite impossible to argue with ultra-conservative patriots like Rachel2 (NOT saying that all British are exactly that. there are – sadly – people like that in every country of the world)
(Laurelei, #172, 29/09/06 10:53)

Laurelei has the final word, as hers is the last post of the thread. She apologises for the fact that she may have kept other participants from posting on the original topic, although many of them did, and explains why she felt compelled to write her posts. In this final post, Laurelei's identity seems to have shifted back to the continental end: her view of "all British" is that of an outsider, the other.

5 Discussion and conclusions

We have seen how the participants of the Freshers Week discussion produce, negotiate and contest identities by positioning themselves and others as specific personas or groups and using metapragmatic acts to evaluate their own and others' language use. The sub-thread is inherently metapragmatic: although the posters are writing under the original topic of the discussion, *Anyone else finding Freshers Week difficult?*, the topic of the sub-thread is actually *Who is allowed to say what about the habits relating to Freshers Week?*. This metapragmatic discussion centres on the identity of one participant, Laurelei, whose initial self-positioning as an outsider defines her identity for the duration of the discussion. Laurelei's self-positioning as continental sparks the entire debate, although it later emerges that she has a dual nationality. She apparently thinks that a status as a continental person offers extra credibility for her argument that British wine is bad. The continental identity that she claims for herself is used by the other participants in their evaluation of the rest of her post, where she is seen as criticising British drinking habits, and her entire post is labelled as racist. That she later self-positions as British and then as a person with a dual nationality does not change the way she is viewed by the other participants. The other

participants position her as a continental person throughout the discussion, and her posts are evaluated against this positioning. For Laurelei, her identity is flexible and negotiated, whereas for the others it is defined from the beginning and resists change (cf. De Fina, 2006, p. 355).

Of the other participants, Timeoff is the only one who explicitly identifies as British (example 15). Although the others do not explicitly self-position as British, they construct their identity by other means. For instance, some use personal pronouns: Haloflessthan50p talks about “*our wine*” (example 5) and Rachel2 about “*our culture*”. In the posts by Zigzag1, the construction of identity is more implicit and happens through his constant labelling of Laurelei as an outsider – and himself as an insider at the same time (examples 3, 10 and 29).

The entire discussion can be described as an ideological battle between Laurelei’s personal identity and the group identity of the British participants. Zigzag1 and Rachel2 are especially irritated by Laurelei’s criticism, and Rachel2 points out in one of her posts (16) that the situation would be different if Laurelei was not an outsider: *what British people say about their own is one thing*. Even though Laurelei self-positions as British, she is never able to fulfil the criteria for membership in the British group (cf. van Dijk, 1998), which she herself seems to accept in her last post in which she views the British with the eyes of an outsider.

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